

Disquietude or the Leap into the Sea

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For João Flor

With Whom I Read Novalis and Keats for the First Time

There is so much in *Night of a Thousand Blossoms* (2004) that evokes the lyric voice and the pseudo-urban landscape of Frank X. Gaspar's previous three volumes of poetry that I again chose disquietude as the undertow that pulls this poet's imagination in a given direction and offers a focus around which I will tentatively organize my own reading of his creative work.¹ This is nowhere more evident than in the ebb and flow of lines patterned upon irregular length and rhythm, which like human breathing are ruled by the cadence of emotion; or in the hitching of the highly visual world of common perception to a dreamlike sense of experience that challenges the reader to a new awareness of things; or, finally, in the spiritual endeavor made language, which weaves lyricism to the vernacular and achieves a complex web of meaning and speculation.

The tripartite structure of *Night of a Thousand Blossoms* is, as in the preceding volumes of poems, the device by means of which Gaspar organizes and entwines intra-and intertextual resonance, each of the sections being introduced by epigraphs. These, when on the same page, make inroads into each other's significance, and when introducing a section are thematically relevant. Epigraphs from Novalis and Frank O'Hara open this volume. The temporal gap between the Romantic German poet and the Postmodern American one is overcome by their common incidence on revelation, explicit in the passage from *Hymnen an die Nacht* (1800) and implicit in the revisitation of a dialogue with the sun in "A True Account Of Talking To The Sun At Fire Island" (1958). I shall start by taking into consideration the role of the introductory epigraphs and, then, proceed with the analysis of the epigraphs at the opening of each section.

The title chosen for the fourth volume of poems shows that Frank X. Gaspar has not yet exhausted the literal and figurative appropriations of Night as a literary theme and motif, as well as a frame for his poetic activity. In *A Field Guide to the*

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¹ For my former work on the theme of disquietude in the poetry of Frank X Gaspar see Alves 2011.

Heavens (1999), Gaspar had converted the hobby of watching the stars by means of a telescope into a metaphor for storytelling which, together with more explicit metapoetic strategies, calls the attention to the self-reflexive nature of the volume. Moreover, Night as a theme and literary motif allowed him elegiac excursions into the world of his ancestors as well as a privileged scenario for his own spiritual and poetic quest, earning him a place among the nocturnal mental travelers who, after Novalis, revere its propitious nature as a time of creative energy. The choice of a passage from Novalis's hymns induces associations with the mystic and esoteric traditions, in which Night figures as "the time of the spiritual sun" and as such is appropriated by the contemporary poet in the English translation of the passage taken from Hymn 5:

*No longer was the light the seat of the gods or their heavenly sign over themselves they drew the veil of Night. Night became the mighty womb of revelations—the gods drew back into and fell asleep, only to go out in new and more splendid forms over the changed world.*² (Gaspar, 2004: n. p.)

Replacing sunlight as "the seat of gods or their heavenly sign," Night becomes "the mighty womb of revelations" in which Friedrich von Hardenberg, reborn as Novalis, emerges from utter desolation into a state of grace and acceptance. At the source of the composition of the Six Hymns is, as well-known, the distress caused by the premature death of Sophia von Kühn, the poet's fiancée, but as loss and grief undergo the initiatory voyage into the mysteries of Christian salvation, the nocturnal connotation to death as bereavement and pain gives way to a redeeming cluster of emotions, which occurs as a dream at the close of Hymn 3. Distinguished from the other merely-numbered five Hymns by the title, the last hymn, "Sehnsucht nach dem Tod", is a celebratory poem about death as the threshold for the fortunate reunion with "the gentle Fiancée and Jesus — the Beloved", a poetic rendering of the belief in the liberation from the weight of terrestrial life and the passage onto Eternal Life. (Novalis, 1998: 59 — my translation). Tragic loss is dramatized as a rite of passage into supernatural perception, the communion with the dead and the identification of Sophie with Christ.³

Relevant to the understanding of Frank X. Gaspar's preference for the excerpt by Novalis is the enshrining of Night as a "womb of mighty revelations" and the

² Cf. Novalis (1964): "Nicht mehr was das Licht der Götter Aufenthalt und himmlisches Zeichen – den Schleier der Nacht warfen sie über sich. Die Nacht ward der Offenbarungen mächtiger Schoss – in ihn kehrten die Götter zurück – schlummerten ein, um in neuen herrlichern Gestalten auszugehn über die veränderte Welt" (35).

³ In the Preface to the bilingual edition of *Os Hinos à Noite*, Fiama Hasse Pais Brandão argues for such an identification by quoting from Novalis's Diary of June 28, 1797, where he wrote "Christ and Sophie", the association of the two names showing that the two are confounded in the same kind of Love in Novalis's re-evaluation of spiritual life. (*Hinos À Noite*, 1998: 12 – my translation).

role of the poet as the lyric “I” that restlessly inhabits the night of mystical perception and visionary dreams. In *Jasmine*, title of the first section of *Night of a Thousand Blossoms*, ten out of fifteen poems are shaped by the overpowering presence of the Night, both as theme and structural framing of the poet’s commitment to poetry, while the household and the neighborhood are asleep. “One Thousand Blossoms”, the second poem, translates nocturnal ecstatic feelings by its association to perfumed flowers — “[...] When the house sleeps / huddled in the city’s jasmine night? Night of a thousand blossoms / I can’t name? Night of a soft marine layer, Pacific fog / hanging about a hundred yards up, a gauze, a parchment?” (2004: 5).⁴ Recurrent references to “jasmine” and to “a night of a thousand blossoms” also evoke the dream-like sense of love, innocence and purity of the heart sung by Novalis in Hymns 4 and 5, taking the shape of repeated questions in the closing lines of the poem: “Am I dreaming all of this? Is that / a train’s long whistle riding the heavenly fog? Am I drunk again / on holy books and the late hours?”⁵ (5)

The sensorial dispersion, the blurring of shape and boundaries characteristic of night are, from the start, acknowledged in the opening poem of the volume when the lyric “I” claims to have been mistaken for a “messenger, perhaps-yes, a messenger” by the elderly couple of neighbors (3). The slight hesitation stressed by the dash suggests that he might be confused with Gabriel, the angel of Revelation, “title patron” of section two in the volume, whose appearance is merely suggested in “I Go Out for a Smoke and Become mistaken for the Archangel”. Under the shelter of the night, the characteristic quest of the voice as mental traveler is resumed, but the poetic discourse of the contemporary Gaspar deviates from the visionary romantic language to become a seamless drift of colloquial language, intense lyricism and speculative meandering through a diversity of observations, allusions, moods, language games and inquisitive interpellation.

Gaspar’s quest, however, is not as persistently luminous as his dexterous maneuvering of language might suggest. Dark strains of anguish pervade his poetry as, for instance, is intuited in “It Was So Dark Inside the Wolf”. The opening lines of the poem show the characteristic clustering around a diversity of sensations and

⁴ Further references to this work will appear with only the page number in parentheses.

⁵ In *Hymn 4*, Novalis evokes the beloved Sophia as perfumed scent of flowers – “*Wie Düfte, sich mit entschlummerten Lieben mischt*” “[...]” (1964: 32 – my italics.) – and compares her to an ever-blooming flower – “*zu bepflanzen sie mit unverwelklichen Blumen*” (1964: 33 – my italics); in *Hymn 5*, Night draws the innocent spirits as flowers towards the bereaved lover – “*Wie Blumen keimte ein neues fremdes Leben in seiner Nähe*” (1964: 36 – my italics) – and, finally, the prophetic eyes of the blooming child look upon the Future and upon the supreme face of the Father and rest on the foreshadowing bosom of the loving serious Mother with ardent divine love: “*Einsam entfaltet das himmlische Herze sich zu einem Blütenkelch allmächtger Liebe – des Vaters hohem Antlitz zugewandt und ruhend an dem ahnungssselgen Busen der lieblich ernsten Mutter. Mit vergötternder Inbrunst schaute das weissagende Auge des blühenden Kindes auf die Tage der Zukunft*” (1964: 36 – my italics).

thoughts — "All day with nothing on my mind, the soft old couch, / the heating pad, a book of Tennessee Williams's letters, / tea, camembert, beer, soup, dozing, speaking in tongues / off in my drowsing mind invoking this or that god [...]" (7). Here and there, we may sense a steadfast creeping somber note that softly edges away under the cover of less troubling moods and a remarkable command of the slightest nuances in the seamless sequence of the lines — [...] thinking of all this swimming forward / without me someday, this bag of small wishes, the greatest / sorrows indelible and indistinct on the afternoon's haze" (7) — but which surreptitiously returns throughout the poem, addressing a series of questions to the reader, which are never mere rhetoric: " [...] Who hasn't lodged in the belly/ of something, who hasn't been devoured? Do you remember? / May be it is something for you like an old tune that haunts you, [...]" (7).

Not only as an old tune but also deeply embedded in the language of poetry, music is present in *Night of a Thousand Blossoms* at different levels and in different functions. Even if it does not appear in the title as a companion to the Night as in *Hymnen an die Nacht*, Gaspar lends it a relevant role when he chooses to open the first section of his book by an epigraph from *The Kabir Book*, or better said, from its version by the contemporary American poet Robert Bly. This epigraph, however, contrasts with those at the opening of the volume (more with Novalis than with Frank O'Hara's) because of its language style, since Kabir, the Indian philosopher and musician saint of the Fifteenth Century, was illiterate, his "ecstatic poems" belonging to oral literature and being therefore composed in straightforward vernacular: "*Suppose you scrub your ethical skin until it shines, / but inside there is no music, then what?*", reads the excerpt appropriated by Gaspar to introduce *Jasmine*.⁶ But in Kabir, as in Novalis, spiritual communion is at the forefront of both mystic poets' concerns and results from the interplay of the personal soul with God, the dissonant note between them, in this particular case, occurring at the level of the language in which the communion is expressed. In the versions by Bly, the Indian mystic has a distinctively colloquial ring, which cannot but sound familiar to the readers of contemporary American poetry on account of its emphatic appropriation of colloquialisms and, in a wider sense, of the vernacular after The Fifties.

Furthermore, the excerpt from Kabir underscores the agency of music in the harmony of the self with the whole of Creation, the union with the divinity in mystic

⁶ To my knowledge, Gaspar uses the versions by Robert Bly, which, according to Bly himself, were meditations on the English translation by Rabindranath Tagore. The *Kabir Book* is a mystic composition in honor of the Holy One that harmonizes Hinduism and Islam in a tentative universal path of conciliation acceptable to Indian culture. Bly's version attempts to capture the spirit of the original Book, a oral composition in vernacular Hindi, by the use of a straightforward, vernacular language distinguished, as in Kabir, by inventive imagery: "Have you heard the music that no fingers enter into?/ Far inside the house/ entangled music –/ What is the sense of leaving your house?/ Suppose you scrub your ethical skin/ until it shines,/ but inside there is no music,/ then what?" (Bly, Robert, 07-05-2011. *The Kabir Book*).

experience signaled by the symbolic conversion of the word into sound. Music is intrinsically embedded in *Night of a Thousand Blossoms*, either as theme announced by some of the titles of the poems as in “That Blue Rondo” or as metaphoric intensifier of lyricism: “[...] Now all the requiems come forth, each one / with its measured voice, each ecstasy and lament, each / joy and despair joining hands” (3). It may not, as in Novalis, be included in the main body of the text as a song, but there are allusions or even quotations of song lyrics in Frank X. Gaspar, although with differences mediated by the cultural traditions of each poet as well as by the writing context, which in *Night of a Thousand Blossoms* is explicitly profane.⁷ Emotional harmony is in these three poets linked to literal or figurative references to music, their cultural differences notwithstanding. Both Novalis and Gaspar work out their longing for what is beyond in visual symbols like celestial bodies or angelic messengers who, in the contemporary American poet, may take the minimalist shape of “bright wings”, as suggested in the poem of the same title: “Then I was walking in the garden looking for the intermediaries / between me and the clear light” (6). In the German romantic poet they are associated to spiritual life: “celestial distances were filled with glowing orbs. The soul of the world with all its powers withdrew into the most secret sanctuary, into the highest seat of the spirit” (1964: 41 – my translation).⁸ Occasionally, Frank X. Gaspar’s poems betray the nostalgia for romantic forms of *Sympoesie* when he brings together visual, acoustic and literary images as in “Castor, Pollux, Athena, Propus”, a poem included in the second section of *Night of a Thousand Blossoms*: “Now there is complete madness under the spring stars of Gemini, / for something is breaking the darkness into a thousand greedy songs” (37).

The close association of the visual and the literary finds a particular expression in *ekphrasis*, a literary description of a pre-existent or an imaginary object of art, “Ode on a Grecian Urn” being the exemplary instance of this literary phenomenon. Allusions to Keats’s Ode appear for the first time in “Bright Wings”, are developed in “The One God is Mysterious”, and recur in “Tonight It’s a Word”. In “Bright Wings”, the Platonic core of the Grecian Urn’s utterance is questioned by the lyric “I” — “What is a man to do in such a moment? / When he knows he’s being fooled by Heraclitean fire and all / those old and hopeful ideas about the moral jewel in beauty?” (6). Parody is the dominant tone, as often is the case in Gaspar’s dialogue with the poets of his esteem in this volume. The same voice is ostentatiously reading Keats letters in “Tonight It’s a Word”, but there is a clear change of tone in the approach to the epistolary activity, perhaps, because it offers important clues about

⁷ For instance, in the poem “You Can’t Be a Star in the Sky Without Holy Fire”, a demented mockingbird keeps singing “*I must have sex*” and “*stay away from me*”, pop lyrics referred to in the last section of *Night of a Thousand Blossoms* (53).

⁸ Cf. Novalis (1964): “Des Himmels Fernen füllten mit leuchtenden Welten sich. Ins tiefe Heiligtum, in des Gemüts höhern Raum zog mit ihren Mächten die Seele der Welt –” (35).

the English romantic poet as practitioner of his art. One of them, dated November 22, 1817, and addressed to Benjamin Bailey is often quoted for its explicit dealing with the nature of poetry:

I am certain of nothing but of the holiness of the Heart's affections and the truth of Imagination—What the imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth—whether it existed before or not—for I have the same idea of all our Passions as of Love they are all in their sublime, creative Beauty— (Gittings, 1966, 37).

The Odes, we are told, are important pieces in the development of Keats's poetry because in their composition "Keats has found a tone of voice for thinking aloud in verse" (Gittings, 11). Moreover, the intertextuality between "Ode on a Grecian Urn" and "One God is Mysterious" allows for the analysis of similarities and differences between the two poets, particularly when we bear in mind that Frank X. Gaspar also claims that the impulse to "write [his] mind" is at the source of his poetry.⁹ The Grecian urn's utterance — "Beauty is truth, truth beauty"— has repeatedly been linked to Keats's readings of Plato and to his philosophic universal ideas in which Beauty is subsumed to Truth. In the Ode, however and as a number of critics pointed out, the urn is an aesthetic object of contemplation, an idealized removed object which exists in a suspended temporality and is addressed by the lyric "I" as "unravish'd bride of quietness", "Attic shape" and "Cold Pastoral". It is the set-in-the-time subjective response, Keats's passion as expressed in his letter — "the holiness of the Heart's affection and the truth of Imagination" — that lends a role to the imaginary vase, inspired in the Elgin sculptures of the British Museum, and advises us to read the rather mysterious message uttered by the surrogate persona of John Keats — "that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know" (Keats, 192) — in the context of diverging functions as represented by lyric voice and object of contemplation. The juxtaposition, it has also been argued, establishes the difference between a Platonic transcendence of concrete time (the urn as stasis) and Keats's poetic rendering of the conflict between permanence and change in an enigmatic utterance that opens up the universe of the symbolic urn to contradictory interpretation.¹⁰

⁹ Cf. Sellman, Tamara Kaye. "Happily Living in Mistery: Frank X Gaspar's natural familiarity with the magical." *Margin: Exploring Modern Magical Realism* 7. Web. (accessed June 7, 2005). At the time of his interview, Frank X Gaspar acknowledged Allen Ginsberg as the poet who influenced his creative posture, and it certainly did in terms of language and even of style, the link to Keats and other poets, merely showing how Gaspar's use of intertextual dialogue has brought into his own text fellow-poets from the most different periods and cultures and how much does such dialogue portray his own post-modernity.

¹⁰ For a critical appreciation of the Ode's portrayal of contradictory sets of feelings such as they materialize around two focus, the urn as object or art/symbol of permanence and the beholder as human being subject to change but also to emotional involvement, see Robin Mayhead's analysis of "Ode on a Grecian Urn" in *John Keats* (79-86).

The convergence of beauty and truth which Keats so superbly realizes both in theory and practice finds a parallel in Gaspar's disposition to draw beauty to the verge of truth, a disposition that possibly led B. H. Fairchild, an American fellow-poet, to write a blurb for the back cover of *Night of a Thousand Blossoms* in which he says that the volume "is a book of questions and quests attended by Ezekiel, Isaiah, Bodhidharma, Plato, Lao Tzu, Dante, St. John of the Cross, Keats and other drinkers of the holy, both sacred and secular". Fairchild's review highlights Gaspar's conversational engagement with the never-tiring explorers of spiritual life and their preferences for untraveled routes, which, nevertheless, take the contemporary American poet to the core of his poetry and to the heart of his concerns with transcendence. In "One God is Mysterious", the *ekphrastic* representation of a Babylonian sculpture reverses the effect of the Keatsian "cold pastoral": "The king and his queen are feasting. / They recline, sumptuously, on long divans / and are attended by naked servants. They can have anything they want, this much is / clear, and I believe they have been having / sex with another and with the servants. / Why wouldn't they?" (28) The reversal is heightened by the shortening of distance between the object of contemplation in which the queen and her king "are / dining, forever, in a gray frieze" and the lyric voice addressing successive questions in a perplexed tone: "[...] And it's Babylon / after all, and doesn't Babylon / exist in you're / memory? Isn't Babylon the clear rumbling / of your heart at ease with its every craving—" (28).

The dislocation of the "Attic shape" to a Babylonian setting conforms to the shifting ethic and aesthetic postures which are interrogated by the perplexities of a lyric "I" who, some lines ahead, professes: "The One God is mysterious / and He has made me crazy. Maybe I am the king/ or the queen. Or one of those sculptured figures / that bend so sweetly toward them, so graceful, / so finely formed and desirable in every way" (28). The change in setting and the reduction of angle between the artistic object and the beholder do not, in any case, erase the fundamental tensions supported by the poem and its dramatic voice, merely presenting them in the light of the temporality in which a poetic inquiry suffused with spiritual interrogations occurs. Plato and Keats are effectively questioned in "Bright Wings" from the point of view of "*this* day and age" (6) and, some pages ahead, namely in "Hobbes" and in "There were Footsteps in the Garden", Eliot is equally brought into the here-and-now as against the there-and-then.

Introducing the second section of the volume, Flannery O'Connor's excerpt from *Wise Blood* offers interesting clues to the nature of Gaspar's inquiry:

You can't go neither forwards nor backwards into your daddy's time nor your children's if you have them. *In yourself right now is all the place you've got.* If there was any Fall, look there, if there was any Redemption, look there, and if you expect any Judgment, look there, because they all three will have to be in your time and your body and *where in your time and your body can they be?* (93 – my italics).

Wise Blood, a first novel, establishes the recurring theme of the novelist, dramatizing the precariousness of human religious understanding, ever seeking after, but unable to reach into the ways of God. At the center of O'Connor's grotesque comedy is the depiction of the crazy merry-go-round of human condition, which also peoples the poetic universe of Frank X. Gaspar. Both of them appear to believe that human frailty may only be rescued by the Keatsian "truth of Imagination", a process that necessarily engages distinctive sensibilities as they materialize in discrete cultural contexts and respond to the specificities of their times.

John Keats also abode by the concerns of his time when "the Platonic conflict between permanence and change, between urn and ode is resolved in a synthesis" which is heightened by the interpretation of the Ode as a "self-reflexive poem resulting from the absolute fusion of voice and object of contemplation".¹¹ There is implicit self-reflexivity in "One God Is Mysterious" as in much of Gaspar's work. In the concluding lines of the poem the distance between the beholder of the Babylonian sculpture and the poet's voice is abbreviated and of a similar nature to that of the beholder of the Grecian Urn and the lyric "I" in John Keats: "The queen and her king are / dining, forever, in a gray frieze, but even so, they make/ a fire in us, *they free the ache from my shoulders, / they make every dark wish lie down with every bright wish, / they bring a great comfort to the harried in this land*" (29 – my italics). A similar metapoetic tension emerges from the other pieces in *Night of a Thousand Blossoms*, the world of literary achievement being permeated by the poet's experience and foregrounding the engagement of voice in the process of poetic activity. "Tonight It's a Word" completes the web of allusive meaning by focusing on the activity of Gaspar's surrogate persona reading the letters of Keats, the poet who has been intertextually present along the volume:

My joints are throbbing from holding my body together. It's / the only way, some nights, I know I am alive. I am profoundly / happy. *Keats is here in his letters*, and Saint John of the Cross, and / a paper about stars that are so dense that normal atoms / cannot survive in them, It's one of those summer nights." (59 – my italics).

The expression of a sentiment of profound happiness is immediately followed by a reference to Keats's letters in the introductory lines, as if the two of them were intimately associated. In a letter to James Augustus Hessey, John Keats writes:

The Genius of Poetry must work out its own salvation in a man: It cannot be matured by law & precept, but by sensation watchfulness in itself. That which is creative must create itself—In Endymion, *I leaped headlong into the Sea, and thereby have become better acquainted with the Soundings, the quicksands, & the*

¹¹ Without refuting previous critical analyses but adding a new slant to the various interpretations of this famous ode, Thomas C Kennedy highlights Keats's intent to foreground his own creative process. "Platonism in Keat's Ode to a Grecian Urn". questia.com/googlescholar.qst?docId=5001637349. Web. 08 June, 2011.

rocks, than if I had stayed upon the green shore, and piped a silly pipe, and took tea & comfortable advice.—I was never afraid of failures for I would sooner fail than not be among the greatest— (Gittings: 84-5 – my italics).

In “Green,” the closing poem of *Night of a Thousand Blossoms*, the lyric “I” also leaps headlong into the sea, taking hold of the memories of the poet Frank X. Gaspar:

And so *I swam out* to where the turtles live, / about a *half mile off shore* where the bottom / is lava and coral and stuck with canyons of white sand. / The turtles are green and as big as the wheels / On an automobile or a truck. They like to glide / about twenty feet down, where they are sovereign / and agile and untouchable, but I was raised on the ocean / and *I still know how to go down deep and stay there*: / (62 – my italics)

“Going down deep” recalls the metaphoric *weg nach innen* in which Novalis excels in *Hymnen an die Nacht*. A diver into deep waters, Friedrich von Hardenberg has emerged as Novalis, his voyage through different stages onto the ultimate state of revelation feature him as a poet who fundamentally drew on the romantic ethos and on the belief in poetic vision as a form of mediation to create the world anew. In his demiurgic role, Novalis inhabits the borderless territories of imagination and shapes them as literary correlatives of what in his mind is an alternative reality to the dismal world of everyday experience, to death and the pain of loss. His creative impulse arises from a sense of uniqueness which, in his case, also presupposes dissolution in the mystic union with transcendence.

Differently from Novalis’s projection of loss on the alternative world of the Godhead, Keats’s leap “headlong into the sea” is a metaphor for creative imagination in demand of “the Genius of Poetry”, a demand that the poet is willing to undertake, even at the risk of failure, for the sake of his own art and of his commitment to the “holiness of the Heart’s affections”. In spite of loss and failing health, Keats brings to his poetic activity a sense of hope and joy that still inspires contemporary poets who, like Gaspar, engage in reading not only the poems but also the letters from where Keats addresses the world. The last lines of “Green” metaphorically carry the romantic English poet to the shore:

And so / I pulled my way up from the deep, kicking and kicking, / and the turtles just watched, not caring much. I lay / on the surface and breathed and rested until I could lift / my head to see *where the current had set me*. / The sun was red and swollen and low behind me, / and the long clouds were purpling under their hems and hedges. / *Now there was so much I had to leave*. / *And now there was so much I had to get back to*. / The beach was a blur of tiny palms, the ocean was windy and warm. / And so I stroked, slow and easy. And so I kicked and I kicked. (63 – my italics)

But John Keats does not blur the boundaries between his letter-writing activity and his poetry, the former belonging to the sphere of life, the latter to that of fiction in a broad sense of the term, whereas Frank X. Gaspar appears to collapse the

borders between life and art, although his mediation of experience is solely an artificial rendering of a semblance, the so-called expedient of the "autobiographical" mode. It is, really, a confidence game in which the poet plays the role of being a self for the reader who willingly consents to the rules of the game. It has been played by many writers and has become a dominant trend in American literary culture, namely in poetry from Whitman onwards. It is a distinctive cultural style, which accommodates to the different periods and their particular features without losing the likeness to the poet's singular experience as a constitutive feature.

The return to the shore in "Green" is an expressive metaphor for a poet who accepts the "pull of the currents" by inviting into his text fellow-poets like the modernist Hart Crane whose epigraph from *Voyages* introduces the third group of poems in *Night of a Thousand Blossoms* or the postmodern Frank O'Hara, from whom Frank X. Gaspar borrows the second epigraph to the volume as well as the semblance of a voice that sounds autobiographical without being confessional. The image of the poet engaged in the self-reflexive process of creating his writings effectively owes a good deal to the use of this half-fictitious strategy.¹² Green is allowed by daylight (it would be lost in the night) and it is the color of the breast of the world which allured all those who sailed the waters in search of "America" and who "in a transitory enchanted moment" had a glimpse of it as "aesthetic contemplation [...] of something commensurate to [one's] capacity for wonder" (Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*: 189). Hart Crane consecrates such glimpse as insubstantial figment, translating it into Whitmanesque oceanic impulse: "Infinite consanguinity it bears— / This tendered theme of you that light / Retrieves from sea plains where the sky / Resigns a breast that every wave enthrones;" (*Voyages*, III: 26). The impulse to dissolution is heightened in the following lines from where Gaspar's epigraph is taken and which I quote in full, italicizing, however, the chosen excerpt as it appears italicized in *Night of a Thousand Blossoms*:

And so, admitted through black swollen gates / That must arrest all distance
otherwise, *light wrestling there incessantly with light. / Star kissing star through*
wave on wave unto / Your body rocking! /

And where death, if shed, / Presumes no carnage, but this
single change, — / upon the steep floor flung from dawn to dawn / The silken
skilled transmemberment of song; (26)

¹² Cf. John Ashbery's Introduction to *The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara*: "Another way in which [O'Hara's] work differs from that of other New York poets is that it is almost exclusively autobiographical. Even at its most abstract, or even when it seems to be telling someone else's story [...] *it is emerging out of his life*. Yet there is little that is confessional about it—he does not linger over aspects of himself hoping that his self-absorption will make them exemplary. Rather he talks about himself, *because it is he who happens to be writing the poem*, and in the end it is the poem that materializes as a sort of monumental backdrop against the random ruminations of a poet seemingly caught up in the business of a New York working day or another love affair. (x-xi – my italics)

Almost as a premonition, Crane courts the sea as abode for “sleep, death, desire” in *Voyages*, and in the sea he chose to rest from a life of dissipation but of immense creative genius.

From the sea where one goes to “drive of the spleen” and “regulate the circulation”¹³, some have returned like Melville’s Ishmael, to tell his tale, or the swimmer in the closing poem of a poetic quest which we, the readers, know that is far from being over. Indeed, what Thomas A. Vogler wrote about Hart Crane applies to the contemporary Frank X. Gaspar whose disquietude may also be described as a “quest for a mythic vision, rather than the fixed, symbolic expression of a vision firmly held in the poet’s mind (*The Bridge*: x). “Kicking back” to the shore, the swimmer of “Green” knows that “there was so much [he] had to leave” but, on the other hand, “there was so much [he] had to get back to”. Among other things, he has to come back to the old stories, as in the “Blue Cigarette and Other Stories”, the poem which Gaspar chose to open the third section of his 2004 collection and which reminisces about “a more innocent time, a more innocent world” (47), the time of escapades remembered in the Keatsian light of joy — “You stoop after beauty, only beauty, pure beauty”. This is followed, in characteristic fashion, by what may sound as a matter-of-fact comment but ends up being one of the abundant self-reflexive digressions on the language of poetry:

Isn’t it written / that on a specified day every prophet will be ashamed of his vision? / That’s how it was from the beginning. Aren’t you *tired of a language that takes no risks*, spoken by persons who have taken no risks? Weren’t you the one trying to make out signs in the feeble streetlight, / in the gauzy rain? (47 – my italics).

Language that is willing to take risks knows no boundaries and radiates in many directions, as is the case with “My Hood of Stars”, a poem that goes from metaphysics “God was still walking in the Wilderness / fascinated and puzzled. [...]” to the very core of poetics “Then / God went a great way into that wilderness, whistling / and singing in bright garments. I watched him go. / [...] That’s when I tried my own garment, / drunk on fear and craving. That’s how I began whistling and singing”. The last two lines veer the would-be act of divine creation toward the metaphoric creative performance of the poet, such a performance drawing Frank X. Gaspar close to Frank O’Hara, a poet who re-invented the language of poetry on his own terms and whose epigraph “ ‘Sun, don’t go!’ I was awake at last. ‘No, go I must, they’re calling / me.’ / ‘Who are they?’ / Rising, he said ‘Some / day you’ll know. They’re calling to you / too.’ ” introduces a note of mystery in *Night of a Thousand Blossoms*. Whoever might be calling turns, however, to be of less import for the exchange between the sun and the half-asleep poet than the acknowledgement of a unique

¹³ As Ishmael did whenever it was “damp, drizzly November” in his soul (Melville, *Moby Dick* or, *The Whale*: 795).

talent to combine lyric emotion with sophisticated nonchalance and make the most of such contradiction in the playful "A True Account of Talking to the Sun at Fire Island":¹⁴

"Frankly I wanted to tell you / I like your poetry. I see a lot / on my rounds and you're okay. You may/ not be the greatest thing on earth, but / you're different, Now I've heard some / say you're crazy, they being excessively / calm themselves to my mind, and other / crazy poets think that you're a boring / reactionary. Not me." (306)

There is a kindred playfulness in Frank X. Gaspar, perhaps with a darkened touch of humor here and there, a wisp of a mocking smile that more often than not gives way to a broad one, as in "Bodhidharma Preaches the Wake-up Sermon", a charming poem which ends on a particularly comic avowal of the lyric voice: "I am bowing and kneeling in every little corner, at every little / helpful shrine, but I couldn't say If I am praying or if I am simply / looking for some small button or shot piece of string that I have lost" (26). Humor is nevertheless a mere side to "the kind of freedom of expression", which has become a reference for O'Hara, and which, in my opinion, is also a distinctive feature of Frank X. Gaspar's poetic achievement.¹⁵ In the contemporary Gaspar, such freedom is spelt in the obsessive search for the cognate word, the unexpected image, variations in rhythm, the dissonant thematic patterning and the tone-modulations of voice.

This brief excursion into the contemporary poet's allegiance to a dominant trend in American poetry should nevertheless be completed by reference to two poems that relate Frank X. Gaspar's creativity to the Portuguese culture of his ancestors.¹⁶ It takes the shape of storytelling about remembrances of things past but not forgotten in the previous collections of poems, or, more subtly, brings to the foreground questions of identity, as when he quotes from Fernando Pessoa, "I am someone other than "I" of whom I do not know if he exists" in "A Witness Gives His Version" (1999: 57). In this particular poem, the lyric "I" is an almost

¹⁴ Although usually associated with the painters of Abstract Expressionism and the several movements in the Poetry of the Fifties, Frank O'Hara's *Personism: A Manifesto* (1959) and his vast body of poetry collected and edited by Donald Allen in 1971 place this poet ahead of his time, nearer "the poetics of our own moment" as brilliantly argued by Marjorie Perloff. "Frank O'Hara: Poet Among Painters". epc.buffalo.edu/authors/perloff/ohara.html Web. 04 Aug. 2006.

¹⁵ In the Introduction mentioned in footnote 12, John Ashbery underscores O'Hara's independence from "schools" and trends, pointing out that he had possessed the singular talent of inventing "a vernacular corresponding to the creatively messy New York environment" (vii-xi).

¹⁶ In his 2005 analysis of *Night of a Thousand Blossoms*, Vamberto de Freitas, who has also translated some of Gaspar's poems, calls the attention to the persistent influence of Portuguese poetry in this poet's work, namely that of Fernando Pessoa.

disembodied spectator (witness, angel, or ghost?) at a pre-burial ceremony of tending to a corpse, a self-reflexive inquirer, a bearer of memory from other times and places, in successive dramatizations of a self whose existence barely materializes beyond the field of “vocabulary”. Intertextuality with Pessoa is again explicit in “I am not a Keeper of Sheep”, a poem from the first section of the 2004 volume, with a Portuguese epigraph from one of the major heteronyms of Pessoa, Alberto Caeiro, which reads: “*Eu nunca guardei rebanhos, / Mas é como se os guardasse*”.¹⁷ From the citation to the very end, the play with the identity of the self is as thematically relevant as in “A Witness Gives His Version”. It starts with the use of the Portuguese subjunctive in the inaugural lines of Caeiro’s celebrated poem, a verbal mode we associate to unreality or hypothetical probability and which prepares the reader for the nocturnal apparition of the modernist Pessoa who, shadow-like, enters the studio of Frank X. Gaspar.

Interestingly enough, Gaspar borrows the title of his poem and the epigraph from Caeiro but places the translated inaugural words in Pessoa’s mouth almost at the end of his own poem: “*I am not a keeper of sheep*, he says. The night / will be long and soft with stars and the heat and the ticking / of one heart or another.” (21) Who is then this presence that stealthily comes in the night, enters the messy room of this American poet of Portuguese-Azorean descent to cause such a commotion that the lyric “I” becomes unfocused — “the center / cannot hold because it was never there in the first place. / One must never let Pessoa across the threshold” (20) — in ways that interfere not with creative energy but steer it into a full awareness of poetic identity? Frank X. Gaspar brings to his poetry the standard experience of a third-generation citizenship that expresses itself in the English language but, as an American of immigrant descent, Gaspar’s culture is as Diasporic as Pessoa’s and not merely contained within a single territory, defined by birth, school and the localized experience of life.

Fernando Pessoa is the quintessential Modernist voice of disquietude, a state of being with which the contemporary Gaspar is also familiarized and admirably projects in this visitor who sits “so unassumingly at the table and you give him a small / drink, and he begins to speak to you, and then you realize / your day is ruined, your plans will come to nothing, you / will end by trying every subterfuge you know to get him / to leave, but he will wait and wait.” (20) With these lines in mind, you might recall the Bloomian “anxiety of influence” of a contemporary poet in face of a very strong predecessor. The appropriation of disquietude by Gaspar is, I believe, of a different order than that of purely literary indebtedness. Indeed, Pessoa’s identity, which he carefully hides behind several personas, only materializes as a

¹⁷ In Portuguese, the long poem from where the epigraph is taken is titled “O Guardador de rebanhos” (1911-1912). It has been translated by Edwin Honig as *The Keeper of Sheep* (Riverdale-on-Hudson, N.Y: Sheep Meadow P., 1986) and the lines quoted by Gaspar read “I never kept sheep / But it is as if I did” (3).

hypothetical whole in the confrontation of face and masks occurring in the "factless autobiography" titled *Livro do Desassossego/The Book of Disquietude*. Authored by the semi-heteronym Bernardo Soares with a Preface by Fernando Pessoa, this collection of fragmentary pieces written in prose is both a mirror and an anchor: as a place of anchorage, *The Book of Disquietude* assembles the different voices in which Pessoa chose to draft facets of the self in search of itself; as a medium of reflection, it devolves the spiritual restlessness of the different voices invited to co-habit the fragments organized in a book after the death of the poet. The proliferation of different versions of this book ensures the authenticity of Pessoa's legacy, the plurality of versions providing an opaque metaphor for an identity fostered in the interstices of different cultures.

Gaspar's gravitation toward an inclusive cultural legacy is of the same order as Pessoa's, and, in this poem, it is symbolically represented by the lyric "I" acquiescence to the presence that both unsettles and ensnares him: "I can tell he [Pessoa] is here to stay" (21). Literary inclusiveness is, nevertheless, processed in Gaspar's distinctive style and voice, as illustrated by "I Am a keeper of Sheep" or by "One Arm and Another Arm", a poem that invites Eugénio de Andrade, another Portuguese poet, into Gaspar's poetry and which is included in a volume titled *O Peso da Sombra* (1982)/*The Shadow's Weight* (1996). Eugénio de Andrade dedicated his first book to Fernando Pessoa and, curiously, his fourth opens with an epigraph from John Keats, a poet also among those of Pessoa's preferences. The common ground between all these poetic voices harbors Frank X. Gaspar's quest, extending the territory of his imagination far beyond the American continent into the realm of transatlantic poetry, as it has been imaginatively explored by Irene Ramalho Santos in a critical study about the interchanges between Fernando Pessoa, Walt Whitman and Hart Crane.

Eugénio de Andrade has been described as a solar poet for his celebration of the joy of life, but it is the paradox of our human condition that appears foregrounded in *The Shadow's Weight*, a volume that, in characteristic minimalist fashion, deals with the encompassing themes of life, death, love and poetry.¹⁸ In one of his essays about the nature of art, Eugénio de Andrade wrote that "everything is solely a pure utterance in time, a surrendering to the light of the primigenial images in which we dwell and with which we are obsessed" (1981: 56 — my translation). The epigraph to Gaspar's poem draws on a strong bodily image — "Deve haver um lugar onde um braço / e outro braço sejam mais que dois braços" (51) —, which in *The Shadow's Weight* bilingual edition translates as "There must be somewhere where one arm / and another arm can be more than two arms"; the remaining two lines are equally

¹⁸ Cf. Introduction to *The Shadow's Weight* by Alexis Levitin, where the creeping note of anxiety is acknowledged as Eugénio de Andrade's confrontation with the "inescapable nay of mortality" which, however, he defeats by the capacity for hope beyond all hope, symbolized in the image of "the crawling morning". (2)

built on powerful images from the natural world and from the morning as a synecdoche of time — “the heat of leaves bitten by the rain, / the morning coming closer, though crawling on all fours” (Andrade, 1996: 79).

Frank X. Gaspar literalizes the first two lines of Eugénio de Andrade’s minimalist poem and, appropriating the remaining two lines into the body of his own poem, composes it around Andrade’s themes, with a touch of humor, but in earnest resonance in “One Arm and Another Arm”, achieving a distinctive delicate balance between lyric variation and speculative questioning:

[...] for it is autumn and the leaves, / in this part of Earth, are not bursting with brilliance, but simply / letting go. They drift into small piles along the sidewalks, along / the narrow driveways and bungalows [...] where / can this be, this place? It’s not the world outside the windows, / and it’s not in the world inside the windows. Maybe it’s in / *the sleep that hangs around my head* and lifts all its fevers. Maybe / it’s that very *light, so low in the air*, so true in its arcs and angles. (51 – my italics)

The sleep that hangs around the poet’s head, the light so low in the air, may, I believe, be understood as metaphors of a particular condition, and convey a state of soul kindred to that of the lyric “I” in “I Am Not a Keeper of Sheep”. In relation to the other poems of *Night of a Thousand Blossoms*, those which invite Portuguese lyric poetry into the volume appear to be particularly concerned with questions of identity, in the case of Fernando Pessoa’s epigraph, and of place in Eugénio de Andrade’s. “There must be somewhere...” hypothesizes the Portuguese lyric “I” and the reply comes in the form of a question: “Would it make you ever want to lie down among the dry leaves / but in your mind only? [...] If this isn’t the false / idea or the true idea, then would you ask me to name this place?” (51)

Naming is a conventional exercise that may hardly be adequate to the suggestive nature of poetry, particularly of the kind that is nurtured by disquietude. Questioning is instead a better approach to those “pure utterances in time, a surrendering to the light of the primigenial images” that convey human feelings and obsessions. It is a characteristic mode of Frank X. Gaspar, a poet who is willing to “leap headlong into the Sea” or to entertain unusual conversations with other fellow-poets, even if those conversations are as unsettling as the one held with Fernando Pessoa. And yet the Portuguese legacy of Gaspar’s ancestors is as relevant in *Night of a Thousand Blossoms* as it has been in the previous volumes of his poetry. This is not to deny how much he owes to his own American native culture, but merely to acknowledge the cross-cultural influence when we bear in mind the totality of his poetic achievement. To understand it a metaphor borrowed from a poem is more powerful and less tedious than a straightforward explanation. Indeed there must be a place where a native tradition and a cultural legacy become more than two single entities. That place is Frank X Gaspar’s poetry.

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